PRAIRIE COMMENT PROGRAM

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"COLORFUL CHARACTERS"

Script by Della Foss

OPENING ANNOUNCEMENT.

It was only fifty years ago that our Canadian West was a frontier— believe it or not. I don't know if it was quite as roarin' a frontier as we see pictured in the movies ... with a saloon on one side of the street, a dance hall on the other, and a gun fight on both sides... But just the same, our Western frontier was pretty colorful and exciting and never think it wasn't. ....To be perfectly honest, I was one of the people who thought it wasn't myself, until I met Robert Gard of the Extension Department of the University of Alberta. Mr. Gard is spending a year in Alberta rounding up the facts of our past, and he was kind enough to tell me some frontier stories I hadn't heard before. Perhaps you have, because I know some of these people I'll be talking about are very well known— famous, I suppose you'd say.

Anyway, for the next few minutes, I'd like to take you back ... not so far back as years go ... but a long way back in other ways. You see, you only have to go back exactly fifty-three years to reach the time when the citizens of the booming little town of Edmonton all turned out with shotguns to keep the landoffice from being moved from the north side of the river to the south. A little bit of history was made that day ... and, as a result, the city of Edmonton is still largely on the north side of the Saskatchewan River.

"Colorful Characters"

Actually, you needn't go back nearly so far to get a good clear picture of the frontier days. At the turn of the century, settlers were pouring into the west; along with them came the usual percentage of speculators and swindlers ... with their own plans for getting rich quick. I think one of the most ingenious swindles was pulled off by some characters who sold Egyptian wheat.

You know how short our growing season is here. Back in the days before hardy varieties of wheat were developed this was a lot more serious problem than it is today. Then, along came these men with their Egyptian wheat ... 6, 000 years old. It looked fine, and a lot of farmers bought it, too. Then they found out... it was just a variety of Poulard wheat... a very ordinary variety at that... no good at all for bread-making. In fact, just fit for feeding livestock.

This is off-the-record, but, believe it or not, an Alberta farmer who was later named World Wheat King at the Chicago Fair ... paid exactly twenty-five dollars for five heads of this Egyptian wheat!

A much more ambitious scheme for getting-rich-quick on the frontier centred round Dunvegan in 1912. Probably you never heard of Dunvegan and quite likely don't even know where it's at. Well, it's up in the Peace River Country ... and it's clearly marked on any map... perhaps because back in the early days, it was a Hudson's Bay Post and a mission. Today it's completely deserted... No one lives there except a ferryman and a farmer.

But that's today. Back in 1912, Dunvegan had a landboom. Colorful posters were distributed in Eastern Canada and even in England...picturing Dunvegan with four railway bridges spanning the Peace River... with street cars and even towering skyscrapers. For miles the perpendicular banks of the Peace River were sold to trusting investors....naturally sight unseen! One lady in Scotland wrote the Catholic priest in Dunvegan, asking him to examine her lot and

send her information about it... since she wanted to come to Dunvegan to live. The Priest replied, "Madam— I regret to write that last night my one and only horse fell off your piece of ground and broke its neck."

But... these were the bad men of the early days... The scene is mostly crowded by well-known familiar characters who did their share to build the West. You've heard of them, too... George McDougall and Father Lacombe, both well known missionaries... Bob Edwards of "Calgary Eye Opener" fame... Paddy Nolan a well known lawyer as well as pioneer... Alexander Galt... Pat Burns... I'm sure I could go on for ten minutes just reeling off names.

I don't know if you'll agree with me, but the thing I like best about the people of the early days is their irrepressible sense of humor. When the going was rough, even when there was actual danger... they made a joke of it. Jim McKernan was the pioneer telegraph operator at Hay Lakes back in 1877— that's about sixty-seven years ago— and, of course, the country was pretty wild. Well, it looked as if the Indian Chief Tacoots was going on the warpath, and Jim got nervous. Finally, just to be on the safe side, he sent a wire to Ottawa, to Sir John A. Macdonald. He wired, "Indians threatening. What shall I do?" Evidently Sir John had something else to think about ... and he didn't answer, so Jim wired a second time, "Indians more threatening. What shall I do?" Still there was no answer. By this time, the situation looked very bad, so Jim wired a third time: "Indians are going to scalp me. What shall I do?" They say Sir John A. Macdonald wired back, "Shave your head, Jim."

So— you can see the west was no place for a man who couldn't take it!

A well known character around High River and Calgary ... Shorty McLaughlin ... found out the same thing in a slightly different way. Shorty was one of the best known frontier ranchers... Well, our newly built trans-Canada railway was something worth talking about in a country as young as Canada... but, sad to say, the trains ran over twenty-one of Shorty McLaughlin's horses. Shorty thought there ought to be a limit somewhere, so finally he went to Paddy Nolan...

who was known around Calgary as something of a wit, as well as a capable lawyer. Paddy Nolan listened to Shorty's story... but shook his head when Shorty asked him to prosecute the railroad. "No, Shorty," he said, "I can't take your case. Any horse that can't outrun those trains deserves to die."

On other occasions, Shorty had things more his own way—— A tenderfoot who once blew into High River could testify to that. Now, in the frontier days a tenderfoot had to tread softly in the presence of veterans... but even at that the average one was soon accepted. This one we're talking about now was the exception to the rule. He had a swaggering, know-it-all manner that got under everyone's hide from the day he arrived. Shorty finally decided something had to be done about him... And he did it.

According to an old Indian custom, when a chief dies, he's braced upright in a sitting position and then left like this ... in his own teepee, of course. Well, Shorty found that a teepee in back of his place was thus occupied by a dead chief. Then and there his plan dawned. He invited the tenderfoot to a little target practice. "You need to be able to shoot straight," Shorty told him, "in case the Indians ever go on the warpath."

Then Shorty pointed to a tree, right beside the teepee and had the tenderfoot aim at it. "Hey!" Shorty yelled, "you came awful near hitting that teepee! We'd better take a look."

Can you imagine how horrified the poor tenderfoot was when he peered inside the teepee and found himself face to face with a dead Indian! Shorty said, "I knew it! Now you'll have that whole tribe of redskins after your scalp for killing their chief!"

That was the last High River ever saw of that particular tenderfoot!

I've heard and I imagine you have, too, that people who live alone a great deal, especially in the wilderness sometimes seem to acquire a sort of

second sight. Today, I imagine we might say there were psychic ... or explain it by telepathy. Whatever it is, strange things have happened. A.L. Brick, a well knownoold timer will back me up there.....

Away back in 1894—— just an even fifty years ago—— Mr. Brick set out on the long journey up the river from Vermillion to Peace River Town. The only person with him was a Cree Indian named Boucher who poled the heavily fur laden canoe upstream.

Suddenly, in the middle of the afternoon on June the 20th, the Indian stopped poling... and said he had to go ashore. While the mystified white man looked on, the Indian climbed the bank, made himself a tiny smudge to keep off the mosquitoes and then sat down with his back against a spruce tree. For the rest of the day... all that night... and until two the next afternoon, the Indian sat in the same position under the tree. He refused to eat, or to sleep, or even to talk. Finally, he told Brick he was receiving a message.

That almost floored the white man.... The west was a great stretch of wilderness and loneliness then. No mail came into into the country... there hadn't even been a soul come down the Peace River that season, except Brick himself about a month earlier. At the same time, Brick was curious to know what the message was supposed to be. The Indian reluctantly told him ... a baby girl had been born to his wife the night before ... the child had died after two hours.

Of course, Brick scoffed at the idea— who wouldn't have? About two days later, they reached Peace River Crossing. Brick called to the half-breed who lived at the Crossing— had there been any births, or deaths, or marriages? No, said the half-breed, no news. "That was just a dream you had!" Brick told the Indian.

But it hadn't been a dream. Strange to say, they found when they reached Peace River town that Boucher's wife had actually had a baby girl who'd lived just two hours ... as the Indian himself had said. It's weird... and there doesn't

seem to be any way to explain it, but it actually happened.

Another character that the Peace River claims for its own is "Twelve Foot" Davis. Davis wasn't psychic, like the Indian, Boucher, but he belongs to nearly the same period ... and his story is unusual. for...By the way, does that name "Twelve Foot" Davis give you a mental picture of a man twelve feet high? That's what happened to me when I first heard it, but he wasn't an unusually tall man... He was called "Twelve Foot" Davis for another reason.

This happened in the late eighteen hundreds in the Caribou Creek gold mining district in British Columbia. Davis was a veteran of the California gold rush, so he understood staking claims... and the thought struck him as he looked over the claims already staked that two of them covered too much ground. Of course, a man had to back up an accusation of this kind, if he didn't want trouble on his hands ... so one dark night, Davis played his hunch and carefully stepped off the area of Discovery Claim and Claim No. One from Discovery. Sure enough, they covered twelve feet too much ground. That twelve foot strip, Davis staked out for himself. Out of it, he took twenty thousand dollars worthof gold...and incidentally, won the name of "Twelve Foot" Davis for himself.

Now, since we're talking about gold, I don't think I can go on without some mention of the Klondike Gold Rush of '98. Today, Edmonton is called "the cross-roads of the world" and "the gateway to the north" ... and I'm inclined to think a lot of people thought the same thing, even in '98.

The best known route to the Yukon, of course, was by boat along the British Columbia coast ... but there were a great number who went overland from Edmonton. A lot only tried to go. I think some of the weirdest caravans ever dreamed up by man left Edmonton in '98 in search of gold.

One expedition, under the command of Colonel Helpman, arrived from England. It was thirty members strong ... completely outfitted ... hay

for the horses ... hay-choppers ... special oats ... and to top everything, even portable baths for the members. Out on the road, this was soon known as the "Helpless" Expedition. For some reason, the packers conspired against the members of the party ... and the equipment was all soon lost along the way. Cook-stoves disappeared, tent pegs... then the tents themselves. The hay and oats and other provisions were so much quicksilver. Eventually Colonel Helpman's party straggled back to Edmonton ... a little wiser, perhaps, but, oh, so broke!

Other schemes for reaching the Yukon were mad— or funny, if you're in the mood for them. Texas Smith— from Texas, of course, was cheered away from Edmonton in fine style. Texas' idea for reaching the Yukon was nearly unique, I think. He had rigged up three barrels, tricycle-wise, and he planned on pushing this contraption from Edmonton almost to the Arctic circle! All of his provisions and equipment were in the barrels... and on top of them he'd built a little platform where he proposed to sleep. ...A very dejected Texan loped back into Edmonton a few days later. He'd covered just nine miles of the twenty-five hundred ... when all the hoops fell off his barrels! His route back to town was marked with a trail of rice, flour, and beans!

But... other ideas were even more wild than that of poor Texas Smith. Brenneau Fabian built a monstrosity big enough to hold a score of men. Everyone called it Noah's Ark... and it <u>was</u> a boat, too, made entirely of galvanized iron. But it was hinged in the middle and the stern could be folded over the bow and the whole layout pulled along on either wheels or runners. Sails were to move it in the water... and oxen on land. As you can guess... it never left the river bank. But... for years it did make an outstanding float in all Edmonton parades!

"Colorful Characters"

Another party built an ice boat... It was really a museum piece if there ever was one! A hurricane coulan't have moved it over river ice, much less a wind. In the end, the citizens looked on and laughed while fourteen teams of horses managed to drag the super-ice-boat out of the way!

But... the ultimate in mad ideas was achieved by the "I Will Steam Sleigh Co." of Chicago. This time it was a steam sleigh, hauling a train of four cabooses on runners. It was a fantastic creation. When the big day of departure arrived, the crew strode about oiling and wiping and testing gauges. The leader shouted, "Let 'er go!" and everything certainly went! The wheels churned, showering the spectators with clods of earth... the tractor struggled, and then finally settled into the mire. That was the end of the "I Will" Co. .... but the Klondike still boomed!

And all that... all these glimpses of frontier life... all these crazy, hardy ventures that went with frontier life ... as strange as it seems, they're all just a scant forty-five years behind us. ....I often wonder how much may still lie ahead in the frontier of tomorrow!

The End.